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ABSTRACT

Nearly every state focuses on implementing standards-based systems but supports educational reform in as many different ways as there are states. An examination of 15 districts located in 13 states suggests, however, that some states and districts have policies and practices in common that support a district's capacity for reform, whether there is an emphasis on professional development, accountability, or student-assessment. Schools in the study benefited from five state practices: development and/or adoption of clear and precise state standards, development of standards-based criterion-referenced assessment programs, provision of professional development, inclusion of rewards and assistance components in state accountability systems, and distribution of federal and state grants supporting reform. District activities that benefited schools in nearly all the states included aligning curricula to standards, building instructional capacity, supporting collaboration among teachers, adopting a district-performance assessment program, evaluating reform practices, fostering relationships in and outside of the district, supporting effective decentralized management, and aligning funding streams to target district and school goals. Some districts emphasizing professional development were more likely to evaluate it for its influence on teacher practices. Districts emphasizing accountability reported benefiting from state reward-and-assistance components. Those focusing on standards-aligned assessment of students' mastery of standards, without an extensive accountability system, were more likely to prefer aligning each district's assessment program with the state's assessment and to evaluate teachers based on their work in the standards-based system. (RKJ)

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The Phantom Mandate: District Capacity for Reform

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THE PHANTOM MANDATE: DISTRICT CAPACITY FOR REFORM

During the last decade, policies at the federal, state, and district levels intended to support complex education reform[1] have been proposed and adopted (Roeber, 1999; Laboratory Network Program, 1998a). In particular, states increasingly are adopting content and performance standards that define student learning goals in the fundamental academic disciplines, and developing related assessment programs and accountability systems. Nearly every state department of education is focused on implementing standards-based education systems and supporting districts and schools in this endeavor. However, states are supporting education reform in as many different ways as there are states.

While the nation is embarking on what might be described as the most significant education reform movement in U.S. history, it is important to examine reform activities to understand the relationship between levels of education policy and reform progress. This summary presents the results of a study of education reform in 16 districts located in 13 states and describes district and state activities that district representatives report as being supportive of local reform.

The research summarized here is part of an ongoing collaborative project of nine of the regional educational laboratories, funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education. The purpose of this study is to identify state and district policies and practices that support local capacity for reform. During the first phase of this project, state officials were interviewed to identify reform policies and activities at the state level and to gain an understanding of each state's reform history (see Laboratory Network Program, 1998a) Four areas of state-level reform activities were identified (see Laboratory Network Program, 1998a, 1998b):

1. developing and adopting standards;
2. assessing students' learning of standards;
3. holding districts and schools accountable for student learning; and
4. providing professional development in standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

In the second phase of this project, we were particularly interested in how districts build capacities that are necessary for complex education reform, how they more effectively engage existing capacities, and how state and district policies facilitate this process. Before describing the current study, we present a framework for examining district capacity and practices employed in this research.

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[1]The term *complex education reform* is used in this report to refer to an education system design in which student achievement goals are defined explicitly, imposed for all students, and aligned with curriculum, instruction, assessment, accountability, and professional development.

District Capacity

One framework for understanding district capacity consists of the four types of capacity in education systems first outlined by Century (1999; see also Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Goertz, Floden, & O'Day, 1995; Anderson, 1993): *human*, *organizational*, *structural*, and *material* capacities. This typology of four capacities is similar to the types described by Spillane and Thompson (1997) — human capital, social capital, and financial resources — but different in that Spillane and Thompson's *social capital* is further divided into structural and organizational capacity, offering a more precise framework for this study's analyses.

Human capacity refers to the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and self-perceptions of people within the school system. *Organizational* capacity refers to relationships among individuals both within the district and with individuals outside of the district (e.g., through partnerships with organizations, universities, or state departments). *Structural* capacity refers to the elements of the system that are independent of people (e.g., formal procedures and policies, professional development programs, curriculum frameworks). *Material* capacity refers to the fiscal and material resources available to the system.

This typology of capacities was used as a lens through which to interpret the data collected from districts during phase two of this research project. As a result, six areas of district activities that affected reform were identified:

1. curriculum and standards (structural and human capacities)
2. assessment programs and use of student achievement data (structural and human capacities)
3. accountability systems (structural capacity)
4. instruction and professional development (human and structural capacities)
5. leadership and organizational capacity (organizational and human capacities)
6. resources (material capacity)

As previously mentioned, the first four of these areas were identified in the first phase of this project as major areas of state-level support of reform (Laboratory Network Program, 1998a). The last two areas were identified during phase two, which focused on district-level reform activities. As in any complex system, each of the components are interrelated and interdependent (e.g., the availability of professional development opportunities for staff is often dependent on the availability of resources). However, they emerged as somewhat independent areas of activity in terms of their role in successful education reform initiatives.

Methods

In this study, 16 districts were studied to document successful implementation of district-level reform:

- One district in each of the following states: Arkansas, California, Florida, Hawaii, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, and Texas
- Two districts in each of the following states: Colorado, Kentucky, and Oregon.

Districts were nominated and selected based on four factors: first, districts located in states

throughout the nation (i.e., in all ten U.S. educational laboratory regions) with progressive reform activities were considered; second, districts able to demonstrate high or increasing student performance on assessments in spite of challenges were nominated (specifically, two districts have large populations of English language learners, two have populations of highly mobile students from families of migrant workers, two have large populations of students from families with incomes below the national poverty level; and six districts serve either a large urban or a small town/rural population); third, an equal distribution of geographical settings (i.e., large urban, central city, suburban, and rural) was sought; and fourth, the feasibility of collecting information was considered. In addition, five districts are located in rural areas or small towns and, therefore, face the challenges of geographic isolation and limited financial and human resources. One district served a large urban population, five districts served central city populations, five districts served suburban populations, and five districts served small town or rural populations.

Two to nine representatives from each district were interviewed to assess each district's reform path, perceptions of the state's role in that reform, and lessons learned as a result of the reform process. Documents and data were also collected from the districts as an additional source of information. In a later phase of this project, schools in these districts will be studied to determine how policy and reform play out at that level of the education system.

FINDINGS: REFORM PRACTICES SUPPORTING DISTRICT CAPACITY

This study revealed a number of specific state policies and activities that directly contributed to district-level capacity for reform in each of the dimensions of capacity identified by Century (1999): human capacity, organizational capacity, structural capacity, and material capacity. This section highlights the key state and district activities that district representatives reported support local capacity for reform. The practices that support district capacity for reform, and implementation of reform, can be divided into activities undertaken by states and by districts.

State Practices

1. States develop and adopt model standards in the major academic disciplines in a timely manner. Although several districts in this study developed their own content and/or performance standards, this process was more often conducted by the state. Districts that constructed their own standards later aligned district standards to state standards. Thus, the timely development and adoption of standards provides a resource for districts at the front end of district implementation of standards-based reform. However, when state standards are developed *after* district standards are in place, districts report that the best state policy is one that is flexible in mandating how, when — and to what extent — districts adopt these standards.

2. State assessment programs provide districts with an impetus for reform. State assessment programs were credited for raising teachers' expectations of students and improving educational equity. Some states disaggregate students' scores on state assessments by ethnicity and gender. Five districts in these states reported using this information when developing district and school improvement goals.

Although assessment programs provide useful information to districts, these tests have limitations in some cases. Representatives from two districts mentioned that the state assessment program does not provide information in a way that is useful for the district, either because the

results are reported too late to benefit a specific cohort of students and/or because student performance on only a subset of standards is tested. Another negative consequence of state assessment programs can be their public reporting of student scores in a way that does not accurately reflect the totality of the district's accomplishments.

3. States provide professional development activities. Six main ways in which states can support professional development and enhanced instruction were identified by districts:

- ***Assistance to low-performing schools.***
- ***Standards-based materials, workshops, and conferences.***
- ***Regional professional development centers.***
- ***Policy.***
- ***Institutes of higher education.***
- ***New teacher programs.***

4. State accountability programs include rewards and assistance components. Representatives from three districts in high-accountability states (Kentucky, Maryland, and Texas) mentioned benefitting greatly from state reward programs. Additinally, both Kentucky districts included in this study have schools that benefitted from the state's Distinguished Educator program in which intensive assistance is provided to low-performing schools or schools with declining performance. Thus, some districts in this study have reaped benefits from the reward and assistance components of state accountability programs. The potentially negative consequences of accountability systems were not experienced by the districts surveyed for this study, perhaps because student performance in these districts was high or increasing.

5. State and federal flexible funds promote district capacity. Eight districts mentioned that flexible federal funding through the U.S. Department of Education (e.g., in the form of Goals 2000 or Eisenhower grants) greatly facilitated local reform. This funding was used for a variety of activities (e.g., curriculum or assessment development, curriculum alignment, staff development). Funding from other federal sources also aided reform. The Texas district, for example, benefitted from the El Paso Urban Systemic Initiative (USI), which was funded through the National Science Foundation. Specifically, the district was able to employ master teachers who worked directly with teachers to help improve mathematics and science achievement.

District Practices

1. Districts align curricula to standards. The majority of districts in this study spent resources aligning curricula to state or district standards (and at two sites, to state assessments). Four districts reported that assistance from external organizations facilitated the process of curriculum development and alignment. For example, a Colorado district worked with the Northwest Evaluation Association to develop its certified high school diploma program, which required the development of exit outcomes and aligned curriculum.

Because aligning curricula in all academic domains can take several years, representatives from several districts recommended focusing on only one or two subjects a year. One way to expedite the process is to use the curriculum teachers are already implementing in the classroom and later to fill in gaps by addressing standards that were omitted from the original curriculum.

2. Districts build instructional capacity. Building human capacity was often accomplished through relationships with external agencies or organizations. Eight districts had extensive partnerships with external organizations or with the state department that helped strengthen staff skills: For example, the Florida district worked with the SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE), the state department, and with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

A second way districts reported building human capacity was by hiring highly qualified staff who are knowledgeable, if possible, about the district's reform agenda. For example, the Florida district has enhanced the district's technological capacity by filling six new technology resource teacher positions.

3. Districts support teachers in collaborating. Strategies that engage teachers in reflection and dialogue were considered to be important by many districts. Spending time focusing on integrating new knowledge and skills into practice through shared planning time, mentoring programs, modeled instructional practices, and staff meetings focused on student learning were important strategies used by these districts to help teachers integrate new practices into the classroom.. Two districts reported using weekly release time to work on standards-based curriculum and instructional strategies. These same districts reported adding a week-long professional development session in the summer, for which participating staff received a stipend. Districts in Michigan and Oregon report relying on their new teacher induction program to develop the skills of first-year teachers in implementing a standards-based approach.

Nine out of the 16 districts, or 56%, reported that central office staff and school-level administrators are involved in promoting standards-based instruction through modeling new instructional practices for teachers, observing in classrooms, creating curriculum materials, and participating in professional development activities. Three districts reported that staff meetings focus on student learning and instructional practices.

4. Districts use performance assessments. Performance assessments and portfolios are a major part of most of these districts' assessment programs. Ten of the 16 districts reported including this type of assessment in the district assessment program. Further, many districts reported assessing students at grade levels not included in the state assessment program in order to hold those teachers accountable for student learning.

The capacity of districts to develop, administer, score, and use information provided by performance assessments sometimes came from external sources. Eight districts reported receiving materials and/or assistance from an external organization or from the state. For example, the Kentucky districts use the writing and math portfolio systems developed for all districts in the state. Capacity to administer, score, and use information from performance assessments was enhanced in some districts by having teachers participate in scoring the state examinations.

5. Districts evaluate teacher performance and professional development.

Districts evaluate teachers using professional standards rooted in standards-based reform. A few districts reported using district-level strategies for holding teachers accountable. For example, the Colorado district's teacher evaluation program includes a professional standard that calls for increases in student learning as measured by multiple assessments.

Districts evaluate professional development activities. Districts in states that emphasize professional development activities were more likely to report conducting evaluations of staff development. These districts most often surveyed teachers about their attitudes toward and changes in practice resulting from staff development experiences. Some states have developed guidelines for evaluating or assessing professional development activities; others have adopted the professional development standards of the National Staff Development Council (Massell, 1998).

6. Districts foster relationships. Relationships are an important dimension of leadership and organizational capacity that many of the districts emphasized. Relationships promoted communication, which helped to align the goals, objectives, and actions of various constituencies. Eight types of relationships were reported as contributing to reform:

a. ***Teams of staff or administrators*** that focus on standards-based reform were mentioned as useful by eleven districts. Representatives from three of these districts reported that having known, respected, and credible teachers take part in initiatives increased the likelihood that others will join the effort.

b. Relationships with ***external organizations or agencies*** (including regional professional development centers and state departments of education) were valued by 12 districts for promoting standards-based reform. For example, the Florida district reported that all of the district's teachers received state training in curriculum materials, instructional methods, and assessment practices that are aligned with the Sunshine State Standards.

c. Relationships with ***parents and other community members*** were emphasized by ten districts. They advocated that long-term, meaningful changes cannot be made without the support of parents and other community members.

d. Another important relationship is between the district (e.g., administrators and school board members) and the ***teacher bargaining organizations or unions***. These relationships were effective when they emphasized a shared focus on student learning and open, ongoing communication.

e. Another important relationship is between district administrators and ***school board members***. More specifically, educating school board members and including them in staff development activities, conferences, and instructional decision making were mentioned as important by five districts.

f. ***Networking with other districts*** via state events or regional or national consortia was mentioned by four districts as valuable for sharing information about the policies and practices that work and why.

g. Representatives from four districts reported benefitting from relationships with ***local***

businesses and government agencies. In addition to funding support, such relationships helped facilitate communication with community members.

h. One district plans to work with local ***institutes of higher education*** so that new preservice graduates can be more knowledgeable about and skilled at standards-based education. This endeavor should benefit this large district, which hires, on average, over 200 new teachers each year.

7. Districts and states support effective decentralized management. Eleven districts mentioned using school-based decision-making teams; some of these teams participated in staff development in action research, team facilitation, data-driven decision making, or team facilitation. The Oregon district, for example, formed a partnership with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) to receive training in the Onward to Excellence program, which emphasizes school-based decision making.

8. Districts consolidate and align funding streams. Five districts reported working to consolidate and align spending. Two districts mentioned giving schools much latitude over spending of funds, in contrast with a third district in which funds are often handed over from schools (e.g., Title 1 funds) to the district to maximize the impact of resources. This finding suggests that decisions about how to use funds can be made at either the school or district level and still be effective.

CONCLUSION

This study's results suggest that education reform requires many of the same state and district activities, regardless of whether the state is supporting standards-based reform by emphasizing professional development, accountability, or student assessment. Districts in most states represented in this study benefitted from five state practices: development and/or adoption of clear and precise state standards, development of standards-based criterion-reference assessment programs, provision of professional development, inclusion of rewards and assistance components in state accountability systems, and distribution of federal and state grants supporting essential reform activities. District activities that benefitted schools in nearly all the states include aligning curricula to standards, building instructional capacity, supporting collaboration among teachers, adopting a district performance assessment program, evaluating reform practices, fostering relationships in and outside of the district, supporting effective decentralized management, and aligning funding streams to target district and school goals.

Some practices were unique to districts in states that emphasize professional development in standards-based reform. These districts were more likely to participate in and benefit from state staff development efforts. Administrators from these districts reported that they are "enablers" and "supporters" of education reform rather than "enforcers." These districts were more likely to evaluate professional development for its influence on teacher practices.

Districts in states emphasizing accountability as the method for implementing standards-based reform reported benefitting from state reward and assistance components of state accountability systems.

Finally, another distinct state approach that emerged was focusing on standards-aligned assessment of students' mastery of standards without an extensive accountability system. These districts were more likely to report aligning the district assessment program with the state's assessment, and to evaluate teachers based on their work in the standards-based system.

In conclusion, this study reveals the importance of a core set of district- and state-level practices in facilitating local reform. Although these results underscore the district's role in reform and contribute to defining this role, it is important to examine policies and practices at the school level to understand the impact and effect of these district activities. In the next phase of this research, staff and administrators in one or more schools from these same districts will be surveyed about the impact of district and state policies and practices on instruction and student learning in order to gain a more complete picture of complex reform in education systems.

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